

Critical Literary Terms

1. Ad hominem

– an argument attacking an individual's character rather than his or her position on an issue

Ex) You should vote against the mayor's proposal because he uses bad grammar and chews tobacco.

2. Allegory

– a literary work in which characters, objects, or actions represent abstractions

Ex) In *Pilgrim's Progress*, the protagonist, Christian, represents all Christians, and physical obstacles represent inner struggles.

3. Alliteration

– the repetition of initial sounds in successive or neighboring words

Ex) "While I nodded nearly napping"

4. Allusion

– a reference to something literary, mythological, biblical or historical

– Patrick Henry urged his listeners not to be "betrayed with a kiss."

5. Analogy

– a comparison between two different things which are similar in some way

Ex) By comparing conducting to politics, Stravinsky helped non-musicians understand his feelings about orchestra conductors.

6. Anaphora

– the repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of consecutive lines or sentences

Ex) "We have petitioned;
we have remonstrated;
we have supplicated;
we have prostrated ourselves."

7. Anecdote

– a brief personal narrative which focusses on a particular incident or event

Ex) Sylvia emphasized Sam's kindness by telling the story of the time he stopped to help a stranded motorist in the pouring rain.

8. Antithesis

– a statement in which two opposing ideas are balanced

Ex) "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness."

9. Aphorism

– a concise statement which expresses succinctly a general truth or idea, often using rhyme or balance

– "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

10. Apostrophe

– the act of speaking directly to an absent or imaginary person, or to some abstraction

– "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

11. Chiasmus

– a statement consisting of two parallel parts in which the second part is structurally reversed

– "Out went the taper as she hurried in."

12. Colloquialism

– informal words or expressions not usually acceptable in formal writing

Ex) Huck Finn says, "I got the fantods" to describe his nervousness and says "shin" instead of "run."

13. Conceit

– a fanciful particularly clever extended metaphor

Ex) Using an elaborate metaphor, Donne compares himself and his wife to the two legs of a compass, one staying in place while the other circles around and eventually joins it.

14. Connotation

– the implied or associative meaning of a word

Ex) "Odor" and "fragrance" literally mean the same thing, but good things have fragrance, bad things, odor.

15. Denotation

– the literal meaning of a word

Ex) Although the word "home" may suggest safety and comfort, it's really simply "one's residence."

16. Diction

– having to do with the word choices made by a writer

Ex) Hemingway uses few polysyllabic words; Dickens uses many polysyllabic words

17. Didactic

– something which has as its primary purpose to teach or instruct

– Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* shows his readers how to be successful; Aesop's *Fables* presents morals.

18. Ellipsis

– the omission of a word or phrase which is grammatically necessary but can be deduced from the context

Ex) Kathleen wants to be a firefighter; Sara a nurse.

19. Epiphany

– a moment of sudden revelation or insight

Ex) Toward the end of the play, Othello suddenly realizes that he has been misled.

20. Euphemism

– an indirect, less offensive way of saying something that is considered unpleasant

Ex) In Victorian times, ladies were said to “glisten” rather than “sweat” or “perspire.”

21. Genre

– a major category of type of literature

Ex) *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem; *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel; *Into Thin Air* is nonfiction

22. Hyperbole

– intentional exaggeration to create an effect

Ex) There were at least a million people at the mall when I went shopping Saturday.

23. Imagery

– concrete, sensory details which contribute to the themes or ideas of a work

Ex) The smooth shell curved gently in the hands, a pristine white shading gradually to a pearly, glistening shine.

24. Invective

– an intensely vehement, highly emotional verbal attack

Ex) “My opponent is a lying, cheating, immoral bully!”

25. Irony

– a situation or statement where the truth is the opposite of appearances

Ex) In *King Lear*, Lear believes his daughter Cordelia to be disloyal, when she is in fact his only faithful daughter.

26. Litotes

– a type of understatement in which something affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite

Ex) My parents were not overjoyed when I came home three hours past my curfew.

27. Metaphor

– a direct comparison of two different things which suggests they are somehow the same

Ex) In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy tells Nick, “You are a rose.”

28. Metonymy

– substituting the name of one object for another object closely associated with it

– “The White House issued a statement today.”

29. Motif

– a standard theme or dramatic situation which recurs in a various works

Ex) In Shakespeare’s plays, mistaken identity and the fall of the mighty occur with great regularity.

30. Non sequitur

– an inference that does not logically follow from the premise(s)

Ex) Richard Nixon said it should be obvious that he was honest because his wife wore a simple coat.

31. Onomatopoeia

– a word formed from the imitation of natural sounds

Ex) The fire crackled in the fireplace.

32. Oxymoron

– an expression in which two words that contradict each other are joined

Ex) jumbo shrimp, sweet sorrow, little giant

33. Paradox

– an apparently contradictory statement which actually contains some truth

– Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.

34. Parody

– a humorous imitation of a serious work

Ex) *Spaceballs* and the space epic genre; *Hot Shots* and action films; *Scary Movie* and horror movies

35. Pathos

– the quality in a work that prompts the reader to feel pity or sorrow

Ex) Acknowledging how he has wronged the faithful, gentle Joe, Pip tearfully asks his forgiveness.

36. Pedantic

– describing an excessive display of learning or scholarship

Ex) The student annoyed his friends by constantly lecturing them about every subject imaginable, clearly assuming he was better informed than they.

37. Personification

– endowing non-human objects or creatures with human qualities or characteristics
Ex) The smiling, friendly sun was about to be swallowed by the angry clouds moving in from the south

38. Sarcasm

– harsh, cutting language/tone designed to ridicule

Ex) Asked if he liked blue, Joel answered, “No, I hate it. That’s why I drive a blue car and wear mostly blue clothes.”

39. Satire

– the use of humor to emphasize human weaknesses or imperfections in social institutions

Ex) The darkly comedic film *Dr. Strangelove* reveals the absurdities of Cold War politics and policies.

40. Style

– the overall manner in which an individual writer expresses ideas

Ex) The assignment was for each student to rewrite the story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” in the _____ of a well-known author.

41. Syllepsis

– the linking of one word with two other words in two strikingly different ways

Ex) The migrants “exhausted their credit, exhausted their friends.”

42. Syllogism

– a logical argument in which a conclusion is based on a major premise and a minor premise

Ex) We get paid every Friday. Tomorrow is Friday; therefore, we will get paid tomorrow.

43. Symbol

– an object which is something in itself yet is used to represent something else

– the dove = peace; the hawk = war

44. Synecdoche

– using one part of an object to represent the entire object

Ex) Sam finally traded in his old jalopy and got himself a new set of wheels.

45. Syntax

– the manner in which words are arranged by a writer into sentences

Ex) a single sentence in a Faulkner work can sometimes be longer than an entire page, but Steinbeck tends to use simpler, shorter sentences

46. Tautology

– needless repetition which adds no meaning or understanding

Ex) widow woman: free gift; close proximity

47. Tone

– the attitude of a writer, usually implied, toward the subject or audience

Ex) sardonic, apologetic, light-hearted, somber

48. Understatement

– the deliberate representation of something as less in magnitude than it really is

Ex) “This is quite a shower we’re having,” said Noah, poking his head out the door of the ark.